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Book Review: Birds of Paradise Lost, by Andrew Lam

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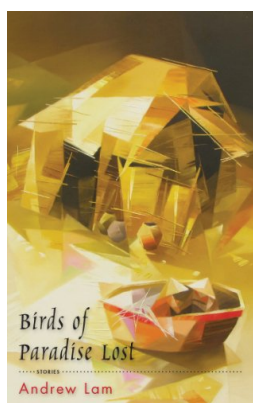
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A reader who picks up Andrew Lam's new short story collection, *Birds of Paradise Lost*, will encounter an engrossing cover image of an abstract, geometric painting in which a house of golden hues is flanked by two small figures in a boat. The visual details of this Vietnamese setting introduce some of the work's interlocking themes: stillness and motion, a sense of the familiar and the motion lines of change, and local and global journeys in a time of war and mass displacement. Comprising thirteen short stories mostly set in the Bay Area, California, *Birds of Paradise Lost* is not only an emotionally evocative work that gives us entry into diverse subjective experiences associated with Vietnamese diaspora, it is also a skillful handling of the short story form.

Lam's characters are all connected to Vietnamese diaspora in some way, whether they are refugees themselves or non-Vietnamese friends or acquaintances of refugees. But what stands out about these characters, parts of whom we have all encountered in American culture in one way or another, are the quirks of their worlds that accentuate the situations into which Lam places them. The stories show the work that characters undertake to muscle on in tough environments even though they have already proven their resilience in life-and-death situations. They are nimble navigators of contemporary life, but they are also vulnerable when confronting the contact zones of a globalized world.

The first story meets readers with the suggestive vibe and fast-paced vocabulary of a sex shop in San Francisco called Love Leather: dildos, twink, and the embarrassed blushes of a young Asian American browsing the goods all appear on the first page. "Love Leather" interestingly positions us in the point of view of one Mr. Le, a fifty-seven year old Vietnamese refugee who expertly tailors leather fetish wear while often finding himself utterly perplexed at the sexual puns and turns of phrases he hears in the store. A former soldier who did time in a re-education camp before migrating to America, Mr. Le is in many ways a typical Vietnamese refugee man, but he is also typically American in the outsiderism he shares with others. His gay co-worker Steven observes, "You know, Mr. Le, . . . I'm a refugee too, . . . I fled from my God-



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fearing old man's crazy Mississippi shit, . . . when he found me out [he] wished his faggot son was dead" (p. 12). The story takes an unexpected and page-turning twist when Mr. Le and his wife explore the Folsom Street Fair, San Francisco's famous fetish and role-playing festival, and experience all kinds of identity transformations and reversals whose implications Lam leaves open-ended.

Further demonstrating Lam's skill in pacing plots and crafting unpredictable dramas, in "Grandma's Tales" two girls living in San Francisco innocently put their grandmother in a freezer after she dies. Not knowing what to do because their parents are away, they "iced her. She was small enough that she fit right above the TV dinner trays and the frozen yogurt bars" (p. 73). A master storyteller who does not judge the protagonist's exploration of sexual orientation, Grandma lives on during a challenging time of adolescence. Only after Grandma strangely reappears to join the protagonist for a night on the town, looking young and telling stories of refugee experiences in an "accentless California English" (p. 75), is the protagonist able to let go of her beloved relative. When a dashing Colombian novelist arrives to escort the grandmother to a second life, we presume that she is going to join the ranks of the world's great storytellers, in turn unlocking the girl's own turn at telling stories.

Other tales go through the quotidian rather than the peculiar to get to the fateful or symbolic. In "Hunger," Mr. Nguyen cannot get his emaciated six-year-old daughter to eat. This is a problem every parent faces, but the pathos of the story lies in the fact that the daughter's steadfast refusal to eat meat—that "she eats like a Buddhist nun" (p. 81)—hearkens the loss of her mother at sea; as one of the "weakest, the dying," the mother was sacrificed to feed the other boat refugees (p. 87). Yet Lam reveals these details teasingly, piece by piece, and he references actual U.S. media representations of boat refugee stories to question their ethics and politics. By the time we understand what eating and meat mean in the broader portrait of Mr. Nguyen's life, we are so immersed in his point of view and social and emotional struggles that the cannibalism is no more offensive than the international ships that Mr. Nguyen watched pass by and failed to rescue boat refugees, or the public's readiness to consume uncritically stories of others' suffering.

A recurring question in American ethnic fiction is the degree to which authors are compelled to provide ethnographic or historical information within their fictional worlds. Such tidbits might give the public knowledge that they do not have or provide an aura of ethnic authenticity. For Asian American literary scholar Sau-ling Wong (1999), these tendencies run the risk of catering to a Eurocentric desire for a "Chinatown tour," where acquired knowledge about a group can give a reader a self-congratulatory sense of understanding and perhaps even become another form of power and mastery. For some readers Lam's glosses on motifs such as pho, Confucianism, and other cultural and historical references might fall into Wong's schema. But they also more broadly suggest the public's lack of cultural fluency in transpacific history and cultural practices, even in a putatively Pacific Century.

There is another aspect to ethnographic and historical information that stories like "Hunger" raise, and this has to do with querying the politics of media representations of ethnic communities and the relationship between the historical record and the shape of diasporic fiction. The title story of Lam's book, "Birds of Paradise Lost," speaks directly to these issues. It deploys the first-person perspective of a former history professor in Vietnam who mourns the loss of a local publisher and influential figure in the San Jose Vietnamese American community, Truong Hoai Bac. Right before Thanksgiving, Bac performs self-immolation by the U.S. Capitol in protest of human rights violations in Vietnam. The image conjured will evoke for most readers

the unforgettable, fiery photos of Thich Quang Duc's 1963 self-immolation in Saigon, which captured the attention of the world and, some would argue, significantly shifted public opinion about America's involvement in Vietnam.

Still a newsworthy event in places like Tibet, China, Tunisia, Vietnam, as well as the U.S., self-immolation is not a quiet way to go to make a personal, political, or social statement. Displays of bright orange and ashen grey billowing upward register the pain of a slow death, and part of the effect lies in the unspeaking protestor whom those upward flames engulf. But in "Birds of Paradise Lost" the self-immolation does not really have much impact beyond the San Jose Vietnamese ethnic enclave; it is witnessed inadvertently by a tourist, even dismissed by the speaker's own son. When Bac's suicide/sacrifice letter is published in the *San Jose Mercury News* alongside his obituary and a journalistic account of the self-immolation, followed by the publication of the son's letter protesting Bac's form of protest, we have an interesting conversation being staged among the different perspectives that comprise a single news story. Lam shows that mainstream media can decontextualize and gloss over how multiple, sometimes divided, ethnic communities are, and ethnic media provides an important complement but is also itself quite contested and heterogeneous. Bac's self-immolation is tragic because there seem to be few public voices that can externalize the complex concerns of the Vietnamese diasporic community, whether those of Mr. Bac, the narrator, or the speaker's son.

This brings us to the unique position that Lam has as one of Vietnamese America's public voices. Here it is worth going back briefly to his published nonfiction because reading Lam intertextually generates valuable insights. In a compelling piece titled "The Stories They Carried" from *Perfume Dreams* (2005) Lam goes undercover in 1991 as a translator for human rights lawyers at Hong Kong's Whitehead Detention Center. The thousands of refugees in this prison-like setting were in the process of being repatriated to Vietnam because of a change in refugee policy. In 1989, the international community and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees drafted the Comprehensive Plan of Action, which stipulated that after a new cutoff date of June 16, 1988, those who fled Vietnam would have to be screened to qualify as political refugees. Lam notes that, "it was, of course, much easier for the powers that be to not listen, to label them economic refugees and ship them back, a bunch of liars stripped of their stories at the end of history," thus resulting in riots, gang fights, protests, and disembowelments at Whitehead (p. 72).

As journalists were generally prohibited from Whitehead, Lam was a rare line of communication to the world and thus approached by multitudes of people wanting to tell their stories. "The Stories They Carried" raises important issues, including how shifting nation-state interests and international policies can suddenly change the kinds of histories refugee subjects become identified with; in a split second, someone seeking political asylum becomes someone seeking economic opportunity and thus viewed very differently by international law. That most would never know of Whitehead and its consequences for thousands of Southeast Asians shows that we need more public voices for telling such stories. Lam thus laments how the globe's increasing homeless population has few to speak for them, a fact that backfires on everyone: "we too, like them, sit in the dark, our hands on our ears, poor, huddled masses" (p. 77).

Coming back to *Birds of Paradise Lost*, Lam's journalistic background served his fiction writing well. Lam is partly able to enmesh us in his protagonists' lives because the context he provides helps tangibly to realize his characters and their worlds. Yet, many of the stories also retain a narrative distance from the characters' points of view. Lam pulls readers into a scenario but maintains a narrative control over the drama at hand, leaving open a space where readers

begin to understand how a character's emotions and responses operate but cannot presume to know everything about the character. The thirteen tales traverse a range of subject positions that amount to a serial portrayal of diaspora and give rise to a history that is part actual event and part ad hoc. As with any narrative tied to cataclysm and postcoloniality, lacunae remain.

Thus it is interesting that Lam's stories themselves exemplify such a tight, confident practice of emplotment in portraying characters who struggle with that very effort, whether because of gaps in memory or history, linguistic barriers, or because mainstream society conditions what a refugee story even is. The potential of imagination in Lam's characters comes across as they try to emplot signs and narrative patterns tied to Vietnam with those of America, or the West more broadly (however, we might define or relate those two entities). The collection's intriguing thematic and stylistic preferences also make *Birds of Paradise Lost* a very teachable text, both for seminars and surveys in Southeast Asian American or American Studies. I assigned "The Palmist" and "Slingshot" in a class on Vietnam and the American imagination because they offer effective, condensed, and funny representations of inter-cultural encounter and transnational migration. Students engaged with Lam's idiosyncratic characters and particularly appreciated his use of humor to relate both the everyday and the momentous. Stories such as "Show and Tell" illuminate how Lam ethically and skillfully moves between racial or ethnic categories, being a story about a young Vietnamese refugee's first day in an American elementary school told by a non-Vietnamese boy. Since Lam returns to similar characters and themes across his books (2005, 2010, 2013), assigning works across them would also be effective if the goal were to show how Lam confronts the intersections of race, class, and gender or how writing in different genres means approaching plot, character, and audience in varied ways. Lam's works are also useful for immersing students in an understanding of their own positionality as writers and readers because they thematize the acts of writing, representation, and interpretation and address how cultures code identity and belonging.

Birds of Paradise Lost is a strong short story collection that stands on its own yet valuably reflects a writer's mind at work across genres, as Lam undertakes the tricky task of interweaving a journalistic eye for detail with imagined dialogues and psychic journeys. The sustained exploration on Vietnamese diaspora in *Birds of Paradise Lost* makes it easy to envision Lam's next project as a longer work of prose. It will be exciting to see how Lam's future works will experiment further with narrative pacing, suspension, and multiple perspectives to continue exploring not only diasporic stories from different angles, but also who is in a position to tell those stories and how audiences will listen to them.

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About the Reviewer



Marguerite Nguyen is Assistant Professor of English at Wesleyan University. She received her Ph.D. in English from the University of California at Berkeley. She researches and teaches in 20th-21st century American literature, with a specialization in Asian American literature and culture. Her current project examines a long history of Vietnamese-American encounters to understand the relationship between historical change and formal innovation in 20th-21st century American literature.



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